

## Opposites

The reading for today from Mark's gospel comes at about the mid-point in the narrative which has thus far been full of traveling and demonstrations of Jesus' power, his healing touch. Mark rarely gives us any of the teachings of Jesus, although we do have his interactions with various individuals who come seeking his aid. Today's passage begins with Jesus seeming to ask his disciples the results of an opinion poll: "Who do people say that I am?" Several suggestions linking him to prophets from the past are given. Then Jesus asks them the key question for all disciples, then and now: "But who do you say that I am?" Famously, Peter comes up with the proper answer, but almost immediately goes from getting the gold star as the brightest pupil in the class is sent back a grade when Jesus begins to explain just what that identity really means. The image that Peter has in his mind for what the end results of this journey he has joined will be and what the mission is that Jesus has undertaken could not be further apart...they are on opposite ends of the spectrum in terms of worldly things. When Jesus begins his explanation that being God's anointed, the promised Messiah, is going to mean undergoing great suffering, being rejected and death...not the glory of regaining the earthly throne of David and ending the oppressive rule of Rome...Peter is quite upset. Peter has witnessed the things Jesus is capable of doing...the power that he possesses...so he rebuke Jesus for this outline of the way events are going to turn out. Peter wants that power to be used in the ways that their traditions have led them to expect...the return to power of the state of Israel. So instead of the gold star Peter was expected, Peter is sternly rebuked in turn by Jesus because: "For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." It seems that not only does Jesus' identity include this path of pain and suffering, his eventual death and resurrection, it will finally be defined by those things. Peter in his opposition to this path, his opposite view, is presenting Jesus with what is another temptation to disobedience to following God's will and purpose. And so, Jesus—in the gospel narrative embarks on a project of recasting who "the Christ" is and what he will do. Jesus won't wield his power over others; he has used his power only to heal and restore; now powerful, and cynical people will have their way with him. God's way with power is shown to be the opposite of the world's. It is at this point when Jesus has spoken about his fate that he begins to speak about his expectations of those who will follow him; those who will be his disciples. "If any want to become my followers...This is an open invitation given by Jesus, a man who has just described his fate very clearly. The imperatives "let them deny themselves" and "let them take up their cross" risk becoming trite aphorisms in our day and culture, especially if we take them out of this context...if we forget they are about following this man, the one who has just described his fate...and which we affirm committed to it for our sake. Jesus offers us redemption...salvation...but as strange as it seems to us in our world view...it comes through the giving up of self. Self-denial is not primarily about squashing our desires or delaying gratification. Jesus calls us to separate us from what defines us—it is a call to redefine and take on an identity, a way of living that rejects the values of the world; the corrosive ideologies and idolatries which cause so much pain and suffering, which build barriers and hostilities and prevent God's visions of our humanity to being realized. Peter's response to Jesus' description of what will occur is understandable, especially in light of Jewish Messianic expectations. What is also true it that response is not so very different from what we want in a Savior. We want someone who is strong and powerful, someone who will rescue us from our

troubles and defeat our enemies. Too often in popular evangelism and images, Jesus is presented this way—as a kind of superhero who solves every problem for us, as a guarantor of prosperity and success. Nothing could be further from what Jesus has in mind. We too tend to have our minds too much on earthly things. Though Jesus is indeed God with us, we cannot tame him or make him over into our image. We would like a savior who is a winner, and one who makes us winners, but scriptures show us that Jesus insists on identifying with the lowliest of losers. He allows himself to be mocked, tortured and executed as a criminal by the Romans. Jesus, expects us to identify with those same folks...he expects us to stand with them and the taking up of our cross means being willing to suffer the consequences of following Jesus faithfully, whatever those consequences might be. It means putting Jesus' priorities and purposes ahead of our own comfort or security...seeing that God's ways are the ways we support in all that we say and do...even if the world does not approve. The self-denial which faithful discipleship calls for does not mean seeking or embracing pain or abuse for its own sake, as if suffering itself is redemptive or a mark of virtue. Jesus spends over seven chapters in Mark going about the country side alleviating needless suffering or oppression whenever he encounters it. He is certainly not doing an about face and endorsing it here. However, the self-denial and redefinition of self which Jesus does call his disciples to do, comes with certain risks. The risks come with living a life that reaches out like Jesus did to those who are ostracized, who are oppressed and rejected by those in power. These things challenge the world view and institutional structure of our society which pushes back and rejects the values of denying self-interest. So this path will not always be easy and there will be consequences; not usually involving the loss of life in our society, but often encounters like the ones found in James, especially the ones where he speaks of the power of the tongue and how it can be full of deadly poison. James clearly throughout his letter indicates that he thinks that words have great power...especially power to destroy. Earlier we read his encouragement to be "slow to speak." This was in the same group of readings where Jesus spoke of it being the things which came from the heart out of the mouth which defiled. James tells us that the tongue "stains" or "corrupts" the whole body. The thing about words is that once they are spoken, they tend to have a life of their own, once unleashed, harmful words are very like the spark to which James compared them which can ignite a forest fire. The images James uses throughout his letter remain apt over the years. They are clear in the message conveyed. I think we have ample evidence around us today in the very uncivil discourse which prevails to verify James' assertion that our words have the potential to be lethal. There is an almost continual barrage of angry hurtful words being thrown about...there are really better ways for us to use our tongues. There are better words for us to find to share with one another...words more in line with the teachings of our Lord...words more in line with accomplishing the healing and restoring of people into communities. James mentions another opposite...this time in relation to the tongue..."with it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God." As followers of the One who invites us to pick up our cross and follow him to save our self, our salvation by denying our self in order to care for others...it seems likely that a part of that path would involve the taming of our tongue so that all our words would be those of healing; that our words should bring grace and peace to others; they should build up and not tear down; heal rather than kill or damage; encourage rather than discourage; be words of love

and kindness, not hate or hostility...the world we live in is truly filled with opposites...and we do know which ones we are called to choose if we are following Jesus as we journey along the way. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.